

Conference Abstract

Join the Dots: assessing 80 million items at the Natural History Museum, London

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Abstract

Collection needs are a challenge to communicate. Collection staff know the attributes of their collections, but other museum colleagues may not. In collections management, decisions of resource allocation may be made locally, rather than within the context of a larger organisational and strategic framework. The Natural History Museum (NHM), like any of its counterparts, has finite resources to realize its dual role as a centre for research excellence and public engagement in natural history. As such, capturing and communicating collection qualities and needs is essential for effective resource planning across the Museum. Effective museum planning depends upon a variety of factors - not least a clear, holistic understanding of the collections that is not just limited to item condition, but which also takes into account their significance and information value. However, many of these factors can be hard to measure or quantify.

The NHM has implemented a transformative institution-wide collections management project, 'Join the Dots', adapted from a Smithsonian methodology called 'Move the Dots'. This methodology captures the qualities of 80 million items and integrates them with

practical and expansive data architecture. Collections are scored across 16 criteria, coordinated by: Condition, Importance, Information and Outreach. The NHM methodology deviates from the Smithsonian source in four significant ways: 1) allowing collection staff to separate collections into discrete 'collection units' and diversifying unit definitions, so data better reflects the practical working arrangement of any collection; 2) criteria have been edited, removed, and added to reduce subjective reportage; 3) a manual has been produced to establish standards across disciplines; 4) comparative analysis is made possible via a web - based tool, through which users can correlate collections data on an interactive graphical display that presents information at levels of overview and at fine granularity. These consistent frameworks move collections assessment from a subjective practice to an objective one.

This methodology continues to adapt based on feedback from staff, initial attempts to interpret the data, and practice. All internal stakeholders can access Join the Dots. Where priority projects are clear, these will become focal points of collection staff forward job plans. This equips collections staff with a tool to communicate collection needs, whilst also ensuring museum planners can articulate the state of collections with precision when presenting to trustees or other high - level audiences. As such, Join the Dots integrates the needs of curatorial practice with the needs of strategic development and policy.

Keywords

Collections Management

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